

11. REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF THE SANDWICH TERN *STERNA SANDVICENSIS* IN KERALA

(With a text-figure)

According to Harrison (1985), the major breeding populations of the sandwich tern *Sterna sandvicensis* are those in Great Britain, France, Germany, Denmark and also the shores of Black Sea and Caspian Sea. Wintering birds have been found to disperse to north-west Africa, south to Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, occasionally east to Natal, but are rare off Kenya.

Ali and Ripley (1987) describe the sandwich tern to be a winter visitor in fair numbers to West Pakistan (Makran and Sind coasts). In India, the tern was observed for the first time in Saurashtra, Gujarat (Dharmakumarsinhji 1958). There was subsequently an instance of ring recovery from Kerala in 1976 (Ambedkar 1985). Lal Mohan (1986) reported the recovery of a ringed sandwich tern in Rameswaram island, Tamil Nadu. However, sandwich terns have been shown to winter in substantial numbers fairly regularly along the coast of Gujarat (Mundkur 1987). With this background, the occurrence of the species along coastal Malabar in north Kerala is significant.

I was at Calicut between September 1987 and May 1989 in connection with an ecological study on shorebirds occurring in certain estuaries and such other wetland habitats of coastal Malabar. During the course of the study, I observed that sandwich terns

were regular visitors to Kadalundi estuary (Fig. 1) occurring in fairly good numbers (Table 1). Sporadic observations made at the estuary earlier by certain members of the Kerala Natural History Society (Namasivayan, pers. comm.) also indicated that the birds were found in good numbers in 1985 and also in 1986. From September 1987 to May 1989, the observations at the estuary were regular and, therefore, the count more accurate.

The birds found at Kadalundi were among mixed flocks of gulls and terns, comprising usually brownheaded gulls *Larus brunnicephalus*, blackheaded gulls *Larus ridibundus*, lesser black-backed gulls *Larus fuscus*, whiskered terns *Chlidonias hybrida* and large crested terns *Sterna bergii*, all usually congregated together on intertidal mudflats. When flushed, however, the terns tended to flock separately before settling back on the mudflats after some time. Most of the sandwich terns found at the estuary were in non-breeding adult plumage with white crown streaked with black. The ivory tipped, black slender bill was unmistakable and within the range of the binoculars. Gullbilled terns *Gelochelidon nilotica*, which also appear white during flight and are therefore likely to be confused with the sandwich tern, were sighted only rarely at

TABLE 1
SIGHTINGS OF SANDWICH TERNS AT KADALUNDI (1985-89)

Year	No. of sightings per month											
	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1985*											35	30
1986*	100	100	100			4						
	100	100	100									
			500									
1987											4	
1988			50	100	6		10		1			1
			20		70							
					47							
					30							
1989	10	50	52		6							
	4		70		8							
	50		100									

* Estimates made by Namasivayan (pers. comm.). Regular data available from September 1987.

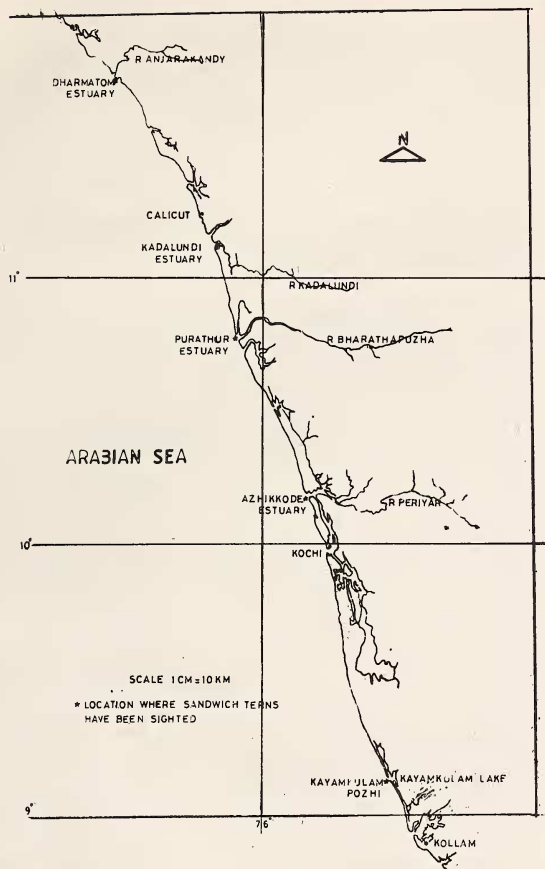


Fig. 1. Locations on Kerala coast where sandwich terns were seen.

TABLE 2
SIGHTINGS OF SANDWICH TERN IN KERALA (1987-90),
AT PLACES OTHER THAN KADALUNDI

Site	Date	Number of terns
Dharmatom estuary	1 Dec. 1987	1
Purathur estuary	5 Jan. 1988	2
Purathur estuary	5 Mar. 1988	30
Azhikkode estuary	26 Oct. 1988	56
Kayamkulam estuary	18 Mar. 1990	25

Kadalundi. However, the former species was found in fairly good numbers at Purathur (Bharathapuzha) estuary, approximately 20 km south of Kadalundi (Fig. 1).

A few other estuaries surveyed (Fig. 1) during the period also demonstrated the occurrence of sandwich terns (Table 2). While there was only a single sight record of a solitary sandwich tern at Dharmatom estuary, approximately 150 km north of Kadalundi, at Purathur estuary, the birds were seen on two occasions. At Azhikkode estuary in central Kerala, where river Periyar joins the sea, not less than 56 sandwich terns were observed. In this case, most terns were found perching on the numerous bamboo poles jutting out of the water surface.

In February 1990, Mohan Kumar reported the sighting of sandwich terns at Kayamkulam Pozhi (Fig. 1), where the Kayamkulam backwaters open to the sea. On 18 March 1990, I accompanied him to the area which is 28 km north of Quilon and there, we found at least 25 sandwich terns besides as many gullbilled terns and three large crested terns. This turned out to be the first sighting of the species in south Kerala.

In most instances cited, the areas were not surveyed regularly except at Bharathapuzha and Kadalundi estuaries, and perhaps the sandwich terns may have a far more extensive distribution than it appears. Further, it has been shown that sandwich terns have been regularly visiting Sri Lanka in small numbers (Hoffman 1987).

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12. NEW NESTING SITE OF THE INDIAN WHITEBREASTED KINGFISHER *HALCYON SMYRNENSIS FUSCA* (BODDAERT)

The Indian whitebreasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis fusca* (Boddaert) has been reported to nest in a tunnel bored in the steep bank of a dry nullah or roadside cutting or in the side of a dry ditch, *kutcha* well or borrow-pit. The nest (a horizontal tunnel) size is given as c. 7 cm in diameter and from c. 50 cm to more than a metre long (HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, Ali, S. and Ripley, S.D. 1983).

On 24 April 1988 around 1430 hrs I saw a whitebreasted kingfisher coming out of a hole from a hay stack of paddy hay (c. 3.5 metres high) situated in the backyard of a house at Mayiladuthurai, Dist.

Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu). On examination of the hole I found four eggs of the whitebreasted kingfisher inside. The nest was a horizontal tunnel 10 cm in diameter and 41 cm long, and was situated c. 1.8 m from the ground. The nest was made of hay and no other foreign material except the eggs was found inside. Moreover I learnt that kingfishers had nested in similar haystacks at the same site during previous years also. The hay stack can therefore be considered as a new nesting site for the opportunistic whitebreasted kingfisher.

January 3, 1990

P. BALASUBRAMANIAN

13. FEEDING BY COMMON NIGHTJAR *CAPRIMULGUS ASIATICUS* AND INDIAN ROLLER *CORACIAS BENGHALENSIS* IN THE LIGHT OF MERCURY VAPOUR LAMPS

The common Indian nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus* is the most abundant and widely distributed nightjar of India. On 29 March 1990 it was noticed feeding on insects attracted by the very bright light of mercury vapour lamps at power sub-station, Bhilai, located in fairly thickly populated area.

An Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*, already on the hunt since dusk, was joined by a nightjar around 1900 hrs, which appeared with its characteristic almost soundless flight.

The feeding habits of Indian rollers have been described by Ali and Ripley (HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, 1983) as "the species has been generally noticed hunting during day time or till late

evening". However in this case, it was found hunting insects in the air, in very bright light till 2100 hrs. Similar instances of Indian roller feeding at lights have been recorded by me on 31 March 1989 (1830 hrs), 12 April 1989 (1900 hrs.), 4 July 1989 (1945 hrs), 22 April 1990 (2130 hrs) and on 8 April 1990 (2230 hrs). On most of these occasions it was feeding amongst a busy traffic area. Interestingly, black drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* was also foraging. The latter species has already been recorded feeding by the light of street lamps (Jamdar 1983, *JBNHS* 80: 218).

June 25, 1990

A. M. K. BHAROS

14. POSSIBLE OCCURRENCE OF THE GREY SHRIKE *LANIUS EXCUBITOR* LINN. IN ASSAM

On 8 February 1990 on the banks of the Brahmaputra river in Lakhimpur district of Assam, I

saw a shrike perched on a narrow branch on top of a hedge in the scrub jungle of the river bank. It was